

## AUSSIE RULES: WRITING AND SOCIAL PRACTICE IN A REGIONAL COMMUNITY

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A specific focus on 'Australia' within the study of 'Australian literature' calls up the connection of the literature to its community of origin, and thus invites questions about the conditions for the production and reception of writing. In this paper I will attempt to offer an appreciation of these conditions by examining the way local community practices can circumscribe the production of local writers. I will be drawing on the results of research I conducted among regional Central Queensland artists and writers in 1995 to discuss the internal rules and logic, and the social location, of writing beyond the metropolis, and will exemplify my perspectives through a reading of poems written by established Central Queensland writers.

My position on this issue is coloured by personal interest, since I am both a regional writer and a graduate student whose thesis explores this topic. More objectively, I consider that an awareness of the connections between writing and its social context is productive in the study of literature. That is, given that the pleasure of literature is predicated to a large extent on the ways in which writing realises 'the world', an understanding of the world which it realises, and the world in which it is itself realised, can provide useful perspectives on a text's meaning-making possibilities. Moreover, writing (in literate cultures) is generally considered the most authorised mode of representation, and hence the most powerful means of accessing the material circumstances which constitute us. Consequently, a focus on the material and symbolic conditions of its production seems appropriate.

Initially, I would like to map out the theoretical framework I intend to deploy, and this is based on the concept of the 'field' of literature. 'Field' is Bourdieu's term for the way in which society is organised according to a series of 'separate social universes' (Bourdieu, 1993:162) within, but independent of, the entire social organisation. That is, it explains the interconnected, but still largely independent, workings of the economy, politics, education and art, *inter alia*. Each field has its own rules and practices, its own system of relations, range of social positions, sets of logic and belief systems (Moi, 1020-21); each is dependent upon specific institutions and their discourses; and each offers the opportunity for competing for, and accumulating, rewards — what Bourdieu terms 'capital'. Because of their role in structuring society, fields also constitute the sites for the production of stories of the community, and thus provide a way of ordering social reality. Consequently, 'field' is a way of explaining the symbolic nature of the social order, and is involved with "the very representation of the social world, and in particular the hierarchy within each of the fields and between different fields" (Bourdieu, 1991:229) — that is, with control of the symbolic.

The field of literary production is, like other forms of artistic production, concerned primarily with representation and expression. Unlike most other social practices, it is not immediately, or even necessarily, directed towards economic

reward, and nor does it produce a product with an obvious use value. Rather, its products exist as social objects only by virtue of a system and set of structures which allow them to be constituted as such. This means that a written text does not exist as 'literature' unless it meets the criteria set by the internal rules and logic of the field of literary production. In this way, the literary field regulates itself, accords and regulates literary value, and attempts to manage stories about the community (or 'the world'). Literary agents — writers and others formally connected with the field — also come under the regulation and scrutiny of the field, and in order to advance their position, and accumulate capital, must negotiate the field and its rules.

These rules are not universal or ahistorical, of course, but are contextually determined. That is, while the field establishes literary standards which work as a taxonomy for classifying texts as more or less 'literary', these criteria are always subject to change, depending upon the historical or local context, and upon the position which the works or the agents occupy within the field. Generally, however, literary texts can be identified according to one of several criteria: they are produced by agents who are acknowledged as 'writers' (generally through having established a publication record); they have been published, preferably by a respected publisher, or performed in a context, such as Warana Writers' Week, which is authorised by the logic of the field. Most significantly, of course, texts are categorised as 'literature' when they are identified as such by agents who are consecrated by the field of literary production — readers and reviewers, publishers, other writers, and structures such as Queensland Writers Centre, Arts Queensland or a university reading list. That is, both the agents and the structures of the field act as consecrating agents, whose recognition transforms a work from words on paper into an object of literary value.

However, the field itself is not unitary or homogenous, in terms of either its logic or of the positions available within it. Rather, agents and structures are variously positioned, and compete from these positions for the right to establish the criteria by which works are valued, and for the capital that is the reward for successful performance in the field. Bourdieu argues that the field is internally divided and structured in terms of a polarised logic. At one pole is writing produced according to a logic which is heteronomous with respect to the logic of economic profit — that is, art produced for commercial success — and which is discredited by the dominant logic of arts. At the other pole is work which is autonomous with respect to the economic field — the consecrated, or 'art for arts sake' approach — in which it is symbolic capital, or prestige, which is valued, and in which success is determined by the approval of other autonomous producers (Bourdieu, 1993:39). Under this reversal of economic logic, commercial success is often regarded as artistic failure, and complex or abstruse works, and innovative forms, are considered more valuable than simple, realist, or conventional texts. That is, the dominant logic values elite forms of writing, such as avant garde poetry or other works that call up a 'distinguished' audience — an audience whose taste and literacies distinguish them from readers of airport novels. Commercial success is often equated with writers who have 'nothing to say', who are 'merely obvious' or 'merely popular': hence, commercial writers tend to be categorised, according

to this logic, as vulgar rather than 'pure', or as wordsmiths, not writers.

Consequently, the field of literary production is marked by competition for forms of distinction, whether according to popular or high culture modality, and by appeals to different forms of logic for hierarchisation and capital. Thus, depending on which part of the field is being negotiated, value may be accorded to a work based on sales, translations, reduction to film script, review in credentialised journals, or inclusion in a literature major. The choice of position, and hence of style and form, is not an innocent or disinterested practice, or simply a matter of artistic choice. It is also "an area of perpetual struggle, both political and intellectual" (Montefiore, 20), and the basis for choosing a position is generated by what Bourdieu terms the *habitus*: that set of durable dispositions that constitute our subjectivity, and that are invested in us by our personal environment and by the moves we make through our social contexts (Bourdieu, 1990:53). *Habitus* also constitutes the community, because it produces in a community "a commonsense world endowed with the objectivity secured by consensus on the meaning (*sens*) of practices and the world" (Bourdieu, 1977:80): that is, a shared culture, and hence shared understandings of what constitutes 'truth' and value. The combination of durable dispositions to practice, and shared understandings of what constitutes 'truth' and value, provides a strong set of frames within which writing can be seen to take place, not as a free art, but as a circumscribed practice: to a degree, it can be said that writers simply reproduce and inscribe the already valorised stories of their communities.

This brings me now to a specific focus on regional Central Queensland. Urban sites are possessed of a greater range of stories, and of communities, than the small settlements along the western line in Central Queensland, and the literary field in this region is in many respects quite distinct from the dominant literary field. This can be explained through reference to the wider social field: since the shared *habitus* is different from that of urban Australia, what is regarded as an appropriate literary practice is also different. Central Queensland is a large, sparsely populated and increasingly impoverished rural community. It depends on primary production, and represents itself as staunchly masculinist and part of the white male battler 'Aussie' tradition. Sport is highly valued, while artistic practices are considered 'women's activities' and not valued, both because of this gendering, and because art is considered extraneous and unproductive. Writing is a relatively new form in Central Queensland: although amateur writing has a long history in the region, it was largely invisible in the far West prior to the visit of the Writers' Train through the region some 5 years ago, and has only become energised and visible in the West since then. While it has been developing as a form lately, it remains a female activity, with women constituting 70% of writers I surveyed. Despite the low value placed on their literary practice by their communities, these writers are very committed to their region, with 45% of the writers I surveyed reporting a high level of involvement in their communities, and possessing a concomitant belief in local values. At the same time, most of the regional writers who spoke to me are literate in terms of the principles of hierarchisation that dominate the literary field. Their production of themselves as 'writers', and their simultaneous, and explicit, investment in the local community allows them to take up an identity as 'one of

us' (a 'local') — and hence non-threatening — and also as 'artist', and hence able to be moderately eccentric. Out of this mix of literary and local forms of habitus comes a practice and a type of writing which is arguably different from that within the wider field of literary production.

This difference is also informed by more tangible features: in Central Queensland, the literary field lacks a clear structure or infrastructure; there are few or no local agents, editors, publishers, promoters, writers' centres, or teachers of creative writing, and hence little structure to drive writing in its public and literary — or 'OzLit' — form. Nor is writing in Central Queensland marked by the sorts of competition that are evident in its wider, especially urban, context. Very few writers are producing work that is either 'high art' or 'popular'; and few, if any, writers make a significant proportion of their income from writing. Writing in Rockhampton most closely approximates the shape of the field in cities; the imagist poets, for instance, are mainly found in Rockhampton and the Capricorn Coast. This can be explained by its larger population, and the presence of the university with its press, its literary magazine, creative writing course and opportunities to participate in readings and workshops. Further west, producers of avant garde art in any form are considered 'eccentric' or 'irregular' according to the local people I interviewed, and hence it is very rarely presented. Local writing is generally traditional, focusing on bush ballads, folk and children's stories, local histories, or classic realist romances. It is also, typically, a social activity; its product is either for private consumption — diaries and family histories — or for local performance and publication, and few of the writers are published, or even seek publication, outside the community. Consequently, writing in far western communities seems to be firstly embedded within the general social structure, rather than in the wider field of literary production.

Nonetheless, the logic of the field in Central Queensland, as in the wider literary field, produces a shared set of beliefs about what constitutes 'real' literature, so that writers and works are legitimised by agents who are authorised by the field. That is, Central Queensland writers and works are legitimised by such practices as winning grants, being paid to run workshops, being published, or winning prestigious literary awards: these show belief in a work's status as literature, and the writer's as a producer of literature. Central Queensland writers are disadvantaged relative to urban writers according to this process of legitimisation: for instance, they are not readily able to draw on the resources of the Writers' Centre, cannot be readily available to run workshops, and cannot readily acquire social capital in the form of a social network comprised of other writers and agents in the literary field.

However, they can become authorised in terms of a different logic — that is, through being recognised by their local communities. Being published in the local newspaper or local group's annual chapbook, reciting at a local concert, or participating in a writers' group provide the sort of legitimacy that is valued by this part of the field. Under this logic, it is work which celebrates the community and its heritage which is legitimisable, and consequently, consecrated writing in this region both makes and celebrates place. As a corollary, regional writers and

audiences often deny legitimacy to contemporary work; bush poets in Rockhampton, for instance, have been known to talk, fall asleep, or walk out during the contemporary poets' section at local readings. They say they find contemporary or avant garde poetry inaccessible or offensive — that it rejects traditional values and standards of decency, that its form is clumsy and disturbing, and that it just isn't 'real poetry'. 'Real work' according to these terms is accessible, sanitised (at least with respect to sexual relations and practices), and celebrates and reinscribes local values; and in this the effect of shared habitus in generating practice and patterns of belief is exemplified.

I would like to turn now to some local texts and examine them from this perspective. I have selected three texts written by poets are 'real writers' in terms of the logic of the literary field. That is, they have participated actively in literary production, have been widely published and performed locally and beyond Central Queensland, have won grants, literary awards and other contests, have conducted creative writing workshops, and have been otherwise authorised by the general field of literary production. Simultaneously, all three have strong connections to the local place, by virtue of birth, residence and occupation and, accordingly, possess a habitus which produces dispositions to practice under both the local and the literary economies of logic. Consequently, I read these poets as typical Central Queensland writers: imbued with traces of the habitus that constitutes this regional community in that their work is concerned with representing and celebrating the community, and with struggling over the relations between rural and mainstream Australia.

The first poet, Charlee Marshall, was for a considerable period the doyen of bush poetry in the region. His poem "No Brighter Star" straddles the purely local and the traditional literary positions in that it relies on a mainstream, received poetic tradition in a classic realist style, while its content is convincingly folk or community oriented. The poem's use of quatrains in iambic tetrameter and consistent structure associates it, in Easthope's terms, "with polish and reformed manners as against poetry in another metre which can be characterised as rude, homely, and in the modern sense, vulgar" (Easthope, 65). Thus, in this regard it claims a connection to an authorised poetic tradition. Its narrative, however, engages with the representation of cricket as the site for the expression of elevated good, and this can be read as a move to claim position and capital according to the logic of the social field. It celebrates masculine Anglo-Australian practices, albeit in a mode that self-reflexively foregrounds its own playfulness, and hence tends to mask its more serious inflection. That is, while the first lines suggest a ludic excess, the remainder of the poem works to retrieve and support a doxic position on social values and practices.

This can be seen in the poem's affective movement from the somewhat farcical beginning: "No brighter star will ever shine/ In all the tapestry of night/ Than he, for whom I pen this line" (1-3), to the more determinate ending: "No fabled trophy offers more/ Than just to know he gave his best" (15-16). The poem's ideological inflection is evidenced in the conflation of conventional masculinity, and Anglo-Australian belief systems, as foregrounded in the eulogising

of masculine sport and the lauding of the local sportsman and participatory practices. The value of this cricketer lies in his having eschewed national fame in favour of local recognition, since "He was not Bradman, Gibbs or Willis:/ To Fortune and to Fame unknown" (5-6), and his invisibility and indeterminacy — given that he is unknown to fame, and unnamed in the poem — allows him to become a universal figure. That is, he simultaneously embodies those prime icons of Australian identity — the Gallipoli digger, the bleeding battler, the struggling shearer — and a Christ figure: "He strives, he pants, he sweats, he bleeds:/Who can do more? For blood is blood" (11-12). The imagery evoked here in the mixing of sweat and blood calls up, for an Anglo-Australian audience, both the originary practices that constitute the rural imaginary, and the redemptive sacrifice of Christ in Gethsemane which constitutes an originary Western myth. Certainly the religious motif is heavily determined, given the poem's title, "No Brighter Star", which implies the Star of Bethlehem, and the direct reference seen in: "God's wish decides how great the skill is" (7). In short, the sportsman stands as redeemer for the community, and at the same time as an integral member of that community, and this logic of value defines identity, integrity and achievement in terms of a connection to the local community. Given the conservative values that dominate the Central Queensland region, and the significance of sport to these communities, this representation and production of the local sportman as hero and redeemer ensures that the poem can attract and affirm a local audience through shared understandings and practice.

Mark Svendsen's "Green Frog Dreaming" is rather more contemporary in style, and is informed by a modernist literary tradition. For instance, ee cummings' "In Just Spring" is recalled by "Just spring, just spring" (17), and Dylan Thomas' "Fern Hill" by the poem's call to "Launch in green and certain faith" (20). However, like Marshall's, Svendsen's work relies to a certain extent on conventional values, privileging home, the family, nature, tradition, religion, and the rural. The first stanza, for instance, reads "Tick tock man is almost home/warmed by unconditioned air/belongs to where he's going" (3-5). This can be read as a modernist rejection of the routinisation of a post-industrialist culture, since "Tick tock man" evokes a mechanised wind-up toy, as opposed to a free, transcendent, or 'natural' man. It also, in a gesture that is at once modernist and traditionalist, implicitly rejects technology in the valuing of 'unconditioned air', since the tropical heat is reinscribed as homely warmth; that is, for the local, the warmth of the natural environment provides a sense of 'belonging'. This notion of warmth, with the positive affect carried by the term, also indicates the value placed on 'home', and the safety and identity offered to 'Tick tock man' by being 'where he belongs'. Similarly, the images of the simplicity and joy presented by "kids pelting past" (11) and the eponymous green frogs who, "balanced in equanimity" (14), offer access to transcendence and the divine, indicates a conservative and modernist inflection in this poem.

This imagery both problematises and affirms practice and masculine identity, however. The initial representation of masculinity is unconventional according to dominant rural perspectives, in that the male persona is flawed, stumbling (1) and sobbing (2) as he nears his home. The transcendence offered as a means to

overcome this position remains caught in a tension, since although the poem locates freedom in the 'green frog' approach to life, this approach is both/either falling or flight. That is, the poem directs the male persona to "Wait to fall and wait for flying" (16), but remains ambivalent about the outcome of the leap — whether it will involve collapse or free flight. Certainly, its demand that the fall/flight be undertaken "in green and certain faith" (20) appeals to a religious position which typically promises security, but it simultaneously problematises the promises of religion: the fall/flight requires a 'dive' through "sprawled humanities" (21) and "unrelenting air" (22), an indication that faith, however 'green and certain', does not allow escape from the demands of the social, or the non-negotiability of natural forces.

The only escape, finally, appears to be into fantasy, since "a parachute of dreams" (23) is the only thing that "forms/some faint and silk resistance" (24-25) to the fall, and hence allows a movement into flight. This, it seems to me, can be read as a narrative of the tenuous nature of masculine subjectivity. While the persona of the poem treasures, and is produced in accordance with, home and the local way of being, he is simultaneously disconnected from the local and its values, poised in a non-determinate lacuna of belonging and loss. That is, he seems to be locked within an unresolved dialectic between the conservative conventions of regional Queensland communities, and the contemporary perspectives of a young tertiary-educated male poet, and hence split between the urban and the regional. This dialectic is potentially resolved by effacing the social altogether, and slipping (falling/flying) into a dream of curves and falls, of silk resistance, that allows the realisation of a Heideggerian Being through an uneasy alliance of sensuality and self-reflexivity.

RG Hay's poem, "Going By the Book", similarly engages with questions of identity and local identification, and with the complex drives of the habitus to incorporate and articulate a range of practices. Its title evokes both unquestioning acceptance of authority and change (the relentless and unquestioned march of technology) and loss driven by representative modes — 'Going by the book'. Like Svendsen, Hay offers a modernist gesture, present in this case in the poem's anxiety over social change and, especially, the effects of technology on the community. However, this poem problematises literary and social practices, and the reliability of the poet's perception, and in this way rejects the possibility of transcendence. It remains in a state of tension between the material effects of technological, political or economic shifts, and the discursive production of reality. For instance, the poem is based on literary modes of production — 'Going by the book' — and on the narrativity that constitutes childhood memory. It also draws an association between the poem's images and Herbert's *Capricornia*, and in this way indicates that various discourses have 'marooned' the rural community. However, since the poet's perceptual dispositions have been shaped by fiction, his ability to see what is 'really there' is always circumscribed, and thus the real is constituted out of fiction. That is, while he records the destruction of Pine Creek, and the continued vitality of Cloncurry, "I went to Cloncurry with/an open mind: to Pine Creek remembering/an oddly mingled Tocky and the Little Missus" (32-34). In other words, ways of making sense are discursive productions, dependent on

the dispositions generated by the habitus.

The poem evokes a connection between personal childhood in the persona's memories of school holidays, and national 'childhood' as exemplified by the presence of steam trains, and seems to suggest a loss of innocence with the encroachment of technology. The narrative is set "About the time locomotives became/diesel-electric" (5-6) and hence records the passing of historical moments, and the decline of rural communities in the face of these changes: "touring Northern Australia/I/went and looked at marooned steam/locos in various states of disrepair in/little towns often looking marooned and in various stages of disrepair" (7-11). There is a sense of violation and loss in this narrative, in the repetition of 'marooned' with its suggestion of malevolence, and of 'disrepair' with its evocation of neglect. That is, the poem suggests the willed 'forgetting' of isolated and tradition-based communities in the interests of urban economic efficiency.

The context of this poem's circulation, if not its production, insists on a consideration of the relative privileging of city to bush, since it was published during a period when the state government was closing railway lines and effectively thereby closing rural communities. That is, the communities are 'going by the book' — "fallen into disuse" (18) — as an effect of bureaucratically and politically expedient decisions. In this way, it records the reduction of the white Australian community from heterogeneous mobility to urban-normed homogeneity, and mourns the loss of communication and connection across generations and locations. It also records the museuming of rural Queensland: "In Cloncurry the rails/were specially laid, in a park-museum/...streets and gardens in/advanced disrepair" (18-19, 21-22). Despite the repetition of 'disrepair', however, the poem appeals for the preservation of the rural. For instance, though Cloncurry is badly neglected, "The railway at Cloncurry still functions,/ with diesels busily hauling cattle, ore,/and even a passenger train. Somehow, a/railway museum near a lively, clanking, hooting,/thumping railway seems nowhere near so/desolate as that other one" (24-29). That is, the rural community is in fact able to adapt to technological and social developments, and is worth preserving: although in a state of disrepair, Cloncurry is still alive, and still part of the environment, in contrast to the dead towns which are "an absurdly vain intrusion on hostile nature" (30). The narrative voice seeks redemption and value within rural tradition and practice, since Cloncurry's continued vitality is based on cattle and mining. However, it moves beyond Luddite concerns about the effects of modernity on the community or modernist privileging of nature, since nature is depicted as 'hostile' and able to render the social 'absurd'. Overall, the narrative of this poem acknowledges the ability of the community to accommodate difference and maintain productivity, and hence appeals for recognition of the regional, and inclusion of the rural in the wider social community.

Finally, then, approaches to literature in Central Queensland seem to be refracted through a double glass — the literary and the social fields, with their often contradictory logics, rules and practices. That is, regional writing is predicated on the dominant values of the local context, and simultaneously upon the dominant logic of the literary field, with its explicit textuality and evocation of

literary traditions and forms. Authorised writing in this region, then, constitutes a site for the production of idealised stories of community, and in this way it consecrates and celebrates the local and, by naming and reinscribing tradition, offers it a firm place in the imagery.

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